



Emptiness: The City's Future Is Childless

If climate hysteria isn't curtailing bearing children, economic pressures of the city are. Young, high-powered workers can't afford kids, don't want to get married and many don't even want to have sex. The lemmings are headed to the edge of the cliff. □ TN Editor

Cities have effectively traded away their children, swapping capital for kids. College graduates descend into cities, inhale fast-casual meals, emit the fumes of overwork, [get washed](#), and bounce to smaller cities or the suburbs by the time their kids are old enough to spell. It's a coast-to-coast trend: In Washington, D.C., the overall population has grown more than 20 percent this century, but [the number of children under the age of 18 has declined](#). Meanwhile, San Francisco has the lowest share of children of any of the largest 100 cities in the U.S.

The modern American city is not a microcosm of life but a microslice of

it. It's becoming an Epcot theme park for childless affluence, where the rich can act like kids without having to actually see any.

Okay, you might be thinking, but so what? Happy singles are no tragedy. Childlessness is no sin. There is no ethical duty to marry and mate until one's fertility has exceeded the replacement rate. What's the matter with a childless city?

Let's start with equity. It's incoherent for Americans to talk about equality of opportunity in an economy where high-paying work is concentrated in places, such as San Francisco and Manhattan, where the median home value is at least [six times the national average](#). Widespread economic growth will become ever more difficult in an age of winner-take-all cities.

But the economic consequences of the childless city go deeper. For example, the high cost of urban living may be [discouraging some couples](#) from having as many children as they'd prefer. That would mean American cities aren't just expelling school-age children; they're actively discouraging them from being born in the first place. In 2018, the U.S. fertility rate [fell](#) to its all-time low. Without sustained immigration, the U.S. could shrink for the first time since World War I. Underpopulation would be a profound economic problem—it's associated with less dynamism and less productivity—and a fiscal catastrophe. The erosion of the working population would [threaten](#) one great reward of liberal societies, which is a tax-funded welfare and eldercare state to protect individuals from illness, age, and bad luck.

This threat sounds hypothetical, but low fertility rates are already roiling Western politics. In a 2017 essay, I explained how low fertility in the U.S. and Europe might be [feeding into right-wing populism](#). The theory went like this: Low natural population growth encourages liberal countries to accept more immigrants. As growth stalls, native-born low- and middle-class workers become frightened of the incipience of foreign workers. To protect themselves, the white petit bourgeoisie turns to retrograde strongmen who promise to wall out foreigners.

Finally, childless cities exacerbate the rural-urban conundrum that has

come to define American politics. With its rich blue cities and red rural plains, the U.S. has an economy biased toward high-density areas but an electoral system biased toward low-density areas. The discrepancy has the trappings of a constitutional crisis. The richest cities have become magnets for redundant masses of young rich liberals, making them electorally impotent. Hillary Clinton won Brooklyn by 461,000 votes, about [seven times](#) the margin by which she lost Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin combined. Meanwhile, rural voters draw indignant power from their perceived economic weakness. Trump won with majority support in areas that produce just one-third of GDP by showering hate and vitriol on cities that attract immigration and capital.

Is there a solution to the childless city?

Surely, downtown areas can be made more family-friendly. Mayors can be more aggressive about overcoming the forces of NIMBYism by building affordable housing near downtown areas. The federal government [can help](#). The trouble is that some of the causes are too big for any metro to solve.

If global demographics had a television show, it'd be called ["No Sex in the City."](#) Across the developed world, couples aren't just having fewer children. They're having less sex, as Kate Julian has [reported](#)—and my podcast *Crazy/Genius* has [explored](#). The possible culprits of this "sex recession" include "hookup culture, crushing economic pressures, surging anxiety rates, psychological frailty, widespread antidepressant use, streaming television, environmental estrogens leaked by plastics, dropping testosterone levels, digital porn, the vibrator's golden age, dating apps, option paralysis, helicopter parents, careerism, smartphones, the news cycle, information overload generally, sleep deprivation, [and] obesity." The trend extends far beyond the U.S. According to the Japan Family Planning Association, [45 percent of women](#) ages 15-24 "were not interested in or despised sexual contact," and more than a quarter of men said they felt the same way.

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